

**Radiation pill supply urged;
State pressured to reverse stance**

From the Chicago Tribune

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Though Illinois has rejected free potassium iodide pills from the federal government, lawmakers Monday called on Gov. George Ryan to provide the controversial anti-radiation tablets to families living near nuclear power plants.

The effort, spearheaded by U.S. Rep Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), comes less than a week after federal officials announced renewed concern over terrorist threats to nuclear power plants and is part of a growing movement by legislators to force states to accept the free pills.

In New York, Gov. George Pataki asked the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for 1.2 million doses of potassium iodide Saturday, a cause championed by Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.).

"I'm calling on Ryan to reverse what I believe is an irresponsible decision," Schakowsky said Monday during a news conference at the Thompson Center. "No one in Illinois living near a nuclear power plant should be without them."

Potassium iodide pills, also known as KI, are not a vaccine or antibiotic that can prevent radiation exposure.

But if taken in time and at a correct dosage, they can help protect the spongy thyroid gland from absorbing dangerous radioactive substances, such as iodine 131, which can cause cancer.

In December the NRC set aside \$800,000 to fund initial stockpiles of potassium iodide to provide one or two doses to people living within 10 miles of a nuclear power plant.

Illinois, which has 11 reactors at six sites--the most in the nation--has 115,000 doses of potassium iodide available for emergency workers and for people who cannot be quickly evacuated. But widespread distribution is still being debated, said Patti Thompson, spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety.

"We have been looking at this issue for 20 years and have not closed the book on it," Thompson said. "But there are some problems that come with stockpiling. It isn't a solution."

Officials are concerned that people who take the pill may do so incorrectly and may be left with a false sense of security. And Illinois officials say the effectiveness of potassium iodide is misrepresented.

"There are no drugs that can be used effectively to block the uptake of other radioisotopes such as cesium by muscle tissue and strontium by the skeletal system," Thomas Ortziger, director of the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety, wrote in response to a letter from Schakowsky.

"It is irrational to suggest that people use a pill to protect the thyroid gland while potentially allowing the rest of their bodies to be subjected to exposures to other radionuclides."

Schakowsky, who is working to pass federal legislation that would require states to ensure that homes and public facilities within 50 miles of nuclear power plants have the pills, argues that Illinois residents have enough sense to evacuate an area near a major nuclear disaster.

"Give the people of Illinois some credit," she said. "They're going to take their pills and head to the hills."